**Biblical Theology**

Lesson 17 – A Biblical Theology of the People of God

**Garden of Eden**

1. Divine Initiative: In the garden of Eden, the Lord God takes the initiative to create Adam and Eve. The emphasis of Genesis 1-2 is on God as the active Creator. First, He creates a place that is inhabitable for man. Then He creates man, followed by woman. It was God who said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). So, we see that it is God who deliberates and determines to make a people for Himself.
2. Divine Claim: God exerts a divine claim upon Adam and Eve by creating them in His image (Gen. 1:26-27), by giving them every tree with its fruit to eat (Gen. 1:29), by giving them a divine prohibition not to eat from 1 particular tree (Gen. 2:17), by giving them a positive command to be fruitful, multiply, and exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). They were created by Him and for Him.
3. Divine Appointment: God gave our first parents work to do in the garden to “work” and “keep” it (Gen. 2:15). They were given responsibilities and tasks by God. Life in paradise was not endless floating on clouds and being fed grapes by angels, not having to do anything. Adam was to serve as a prophet, priest, and king to Yahweh.
4. Divine Presence: God demonstrates His presence with His people by talking to Adam and giving him instructions. Genesis 3:8 which says “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” reads like it was a usual occurrence. God was present with His people and walked and talked with them.
5. Human Response: Adam and Eve’s response to God’s initiative in creating them, His claim upon them as Creator and Owner, His appointment of them to specific roles, and His presence dwelling with them, was to worship and serve Him only.
6. After the Fall, God still indicates to Adam and Eve His claim, appointment, and presence with them by taking the initiative to clothe them with animal skins (Gen. 3:21). Though there is now sin, curse, and death, God still relates to His people in these 5 areas of initiative, claim, appointment, and presence, which requires response.

**Old Testament After the Fall**

1. In the Old Testament, the people of God grow from 2 people to a disparate group of people like Job and Noah, before centering on Abraham and his descendants (patriarchs) who grow from 1 man into 70 people in Egypt into the nation of Israel.
2. Divine Initiative:
   1. God exhibits His divine initiative with Noah who “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8).
   2. God exhibits His divine initiative with Abraham first by calling Abram to leave and go to a land that God will show him (Gen. 12:1) and by initiating the covenant with Abram (Gen. 12:1-3; 15; 17:1-14).
   3. God takes the initiative to call the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and bring them into the Promised Land through the mediator Moses (Exod 3:7-8). Moses does not call himself to lead Israel anymore than Israel calls herself out of Egypt.
3. Divine Claim:
   1. God exhibits His divine claim upon His creation by determining to destroy the world because of the wickedness of man’s heart (Gen. 6:5, 11-12), yet He singles out Noah for rescue. Even though the world is destroyed, man retains the image of God upon him (though it is now damaged and distorted) as seen in the prohibition against murder (Gen. 9:6).
   2. God exhibits His divine claim upon Abraham and his descendants by promising “to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7) as well as “I will be their God” (Gen. 17:8)
   3. God exhibits His divine claim upon the Israelites as a nation by remembering His covenant with Abraham (Exod 2:23-24). As Abraham’s descendants, God still has a claim upon them as His particular people. The Israelites are His people (Exod 3:7, 10, 15; 5:1). He reiterates His Abrahamic claim upon them by saying “I will take you to be my people and I will be your God” (Exod 6:7). It was God who “bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself” (Exod 19:4). And in Leviticus 26:12, “I will be your God.”
4. Divine Appointment:
   1. God exhibits His divine appointment upon Noah by commanding him to build an ark out of gopher wood and to take his family into the ark as well as 2 of every animal once it is completed (Gen. 6:13-22). Additionally, Noah is given the same Edenic mandate of being fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 9:1).
   2. God appointed Abraham to be the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:2), the father of many nations and kings (Gen. 17:4) as well as appointed Abraham to keep covenant with Him (Gen. 17:9-14).
   3. God appointed the nation of Israel to be His treasured possession (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 26:18) among all the earth which is also His. And they were appointed to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:6; Deut 14:2; Lev. 19:2). In other words, the people of God in the OT as the nation of Israel was appointed to be a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 51:4; 60:3).
5. Divine Presence:
   1. God exhibits His divine presence with Noah by establishing a covenant with him (Gen. 6:18) as well as remembering him and the ark after everything has been destroyed (Gen. 8:1).
   2. God exhibits His divine presence with Abraham by leading Abraham to the land He was going to show him (Gen. 12:1). The Lord was with Abraham when Abraham goes down into Egypt (Gen. 12:17) as well as appearing to Abraham in the mysterious person of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17-20), in the promise to give him a child (Gen. 18:1-15), and in revealing His plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-33).
   3. God exhibits His divine presence with Israel through the pillar of fire and cloud in the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 13:21-22, 14:19-24), as well as the pillar of cloud descending upon the tabernacle (Exod. 33:9-10). The tabernacle/Temple becomes the symbol of God’s presence with His people. He tells them in Leviticus 26:12, “I will walk among you…”
6. Human Response:
   1. Noah’s response was obedience to God in building the ark and building an altar to worship Him after the land was dry again (Gen. 8:20).
   2. Abraham’s response to God’s divine claim, appointment, and presence was obedience to God as well as worship. In response to God’s call in Genesis 12, Abram builds an altar to the Lord (12:7-8). Abraham also obediently responds to God by leaving his land as well as setting up to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22).
   3. Israel’s response to God’s claim upon her, His presence among her, and His appointment of her was to be one of obedience and worship. She was to be holy even as her God was holy (Lev. 19:2). Israel was to “keep covenant” with her God (Exod. 19:5) and be consecrated to Him (Exod. 22:31). She was to worship God according to His instructions (Levititus) and to walk in His ways (Deut. 5:32, 8:1, 11:32, 12:1). Deuteronomy 12:32 says, “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.”

**New Testament**

1. Divine Initiative: Jesus speaks of His choosing His own people. He says in John 15:16, “You did not choose me, but I chose you…” Paul points to Jesus as being the true seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), and says that all who believe upon Jesus are engrafted into Him so that they become a true Jew, that is a spiritual Jew (Rom. 2:29; 9:6-8, 24; Gal 3:13-14). So as the proclamation of Christ goes out to all the nations and people from every tribe, tongue, family, and nation repent and believe the Gospel, they are engrafted into Christ and become a true Jew, a true seed of Abraham. All of this undertaken by God Himself who takes the initiative to choose a people for Himself and call that people to Himself. Through this, Christ is the one who builds His church (Matt. 16:18).
2. Divine Claim: God in Christ has redeemed us in order to “purify for Himself a people for His own possession” (Titus 2:14). Paul in Romans 9 quotes from Hosea 2 and applies it to the church in saying, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people’…” And again in 2 Corinthians 6, Paul quotes from the OT and applies it to the church in saying, “I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me…” Chuck Hill writes, “God’s promise that He will be our God and that we will be His people is the essence of the covenant promise, the source and basis of the intimate fellowship experienced by His people here on earth ever since it was first uttered to Abraham (see Gen. 17:7-8; Ex. 20:2; Lev. 26:11; Deut. 5:2-6; Jer. 24:7, 30:22, 31:33, 32:38; Ezek. 11:20, 37:26ff; Zech. 8:7-8, 13:9; 2 Cor. 6:16).”
3. Divine Appointment: The Church is the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) who is a kingdom of priests and holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). Jesus has appointed His people to bear fruit which abides (John 15:16). He has called the church to be “the light of the world” and “a city on a hill” that cannot be hidden (Matt. 5:14).
4. Divine Presence: Jesus is called “Immanuel” which means “God with us” (Matt 1:23). He is said to be God “tabernacling” among mankind (John 1:14). He promises His continued presence with His people into eternity (Matt. 28:20) and God’s presence is manifest within His people via the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26-27; 16:7-11). Paul says that “we are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16).
5. Human Response: The church is called to present itself as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) which is our “spiritual worship” as well as offer the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15). And so, we serve as prophets to our God through Christ in proclaiming Him to the world (1 Cor. 1:23; 9:16; 2 Cor. 10:16; Gal 1:16; Eph. 3:8; 2 Tim 4:2). We serve as priests to our God through Christ in interceding for the world (Rom. 15:16). Our response to God’s call, claim, and appointment is one of obedience and worship (Phil 3:3; Heb 12:28).

**New Heavens/Earth**

1. Divine Initiative: It is God who takes the initiative in coming back to the earth to wage final war on His enemies, judge them at the great white throne judgment, and then send the New Heavens and Earth and New Jerusalem which is said to come down “from God” (Rev. 21:2). He takes the initiative to wipe away the tears of His people and to overthrow death (Rev. 21:4).
2. Divine Claim: In the New Heavens & Earth, God is said to dwell with His people and He will be their God (Rev. 21:3). Revelation 21:7 says, “To the one who conquers…I will be His God and he will be my son.” God’s claim upon His people as His own continues into eternity. We will forever be God’s and He will forever be ours.
3. Divine Appointment: The elect of God are appointed bring glory and honor to God as He sits upon His throne and gives light to His new creation (Rev. 21:22-24). We are also granted the right to eat of the tree of life and come in and out of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:14).
4. Divine Presence: God will tabernacle with His people in His tabernacle in the New Heavens and Earth (Rev 21:3). And God will walk with His people in the New Jerusalem and the New Heavens and Earth. We will see His Face and His name will be on our foreheads (Rev. 22:4). In fact, the dwelling place of God is with man (Rev. 21:3).
5. Human Response: In the New Heavens and the New Earth, God’s servants will worship Him (Rev. 22:3) and walk in perfect holiness before Him (Rev. 22:3)

**Take-Aways**

1. The people of God grow from a family unit of 2 people to a great and numerous geopolitical nation who were to be a light to the world as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The nation in the NT becomes a spiritual nation rather than a geopolitical nation, but the appointment as a kingdom of priests and holy nation remains. The church is called to be a city on a hill (i.e., light to the nations) just like Israel. The Church has the same divine appointment as Israel. Elmer Martens points out, “God has a penultimate purpose, namely the shaping of a people with a clear identity, but His ultimate purpose is for this people to announce God’s mighty acts to others, indeed to people everywhere.”
2. The Church also has the same divine initiative, claim, and presence. God is the one who creates the Church and calls the Church His own, just as He created the nation of Israel and called them to be His own. His divine presence symbolized in the Old Testament with the tabernacle/Temple becomes the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ who is the true Temple in the NT. And the response of the Church just like Israel was to obey God and worship Him. Elmer Martens writes, “[The people of God] is a people located in all sectors of the globe, who, although imperfect, nevertheless sing the praises of a redeeming God, aspire to a God-intended unity, seek to live ethically as God’s holy people, which may mean being countercultural, and are self-consciously and joyously missional.”
3. From beginning to end, God takes the initiative to create a people for Himself. John Goldingay says, “It is not that God makes an already existent people His own; He brings a people into being. They only exist as a people because of an act of God.” He lays claim to them, gives them an appointment (mission), and calls them to walk with Him in obedience and worship and serve Him alone. Given that the same titles and roles are given to both Israel as well as the Church, and the fact that the Church is even called God’s Israel (Gal. 6:16), it becomes apparent that God has always had 1 people for Himself, administered in the Old Testament as the nation of Israel and administered in the New Testament as the Church. It’s not 2 different people of God, but 1 people of God under 2 administrations/manifestations.
4. On an individual level, this helps us to understand that as a Christian, I do not belong to myself. The Lord God has taken the divine initiative to lay a claim upon my life and called me to be a light to those around me both in word and deed. And I can do this with confidence because the Lord God Himself is dwelling with me and within me and my response for such grace and mercy is to worship Him and walk in His commandments.